

Joy to the World

December 12, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Luke 1:39-45

Anyone besides me love this scripture?

I think that this scripture reading is an absolute treasure. One of my all-time favorites.

I love that we have a coming together of two different women who find themselves in the same general situation – they are both unexpectedly pregnant – but they could not be more different from each other if they tried:

- For starters, Elizabeth is older, and Mary is very young.
 - We don't know exactly how old Elizabeth was when John the Baptist was born, but we know that she was well-beyond childbearing age. Some scholars place her in her early-to-mid-50s; and others say she may have been as old as 88. But whatever the case, this isn't just a high-risk pregnancy. This is like, cuckoo for cocoa nuts, you-just-don't-do-that high-risk. Like, "if you successfully carry this baby to term, you've earned yourself a spot on a TV show" high-risk. My mom actually had my younger brothers – twins – when she was 47, and we all thought she was crazy. She herself has lamented how much harder pregnancy and childbirth and parenting is later in life. And she was much younger than Elizabeth.
 - In contrast, Mary was very young. Most scholars place her somewhere between about 12 and 16 years old. Barely old enough to know her own body. Old enough to marry and have kids, in that tradition and in that day and age (which is its own special breed of cuckoo) – but still, basically a child. Barely even old enough to know where babies come from.
- Elizabeth has been struggling with infertility for her entire adult life. She wants nothing more than to be a mom; that's been her lifelong goal; her lifelong dream; her lifelong sorrow. Finally, at some point she just gave up. In contrast, we have Mary who has barely even *looked* at a boy and she is pregnant.
 - I remember when I was struggling with infertility I had the hardest time going on Facebook because it seemed like all of my friends were posting ultrasound pictures and due dates and baby pictures and pictures of their adorably decorated nurseries, and every time I would see one of these pictures, I was happy for my friend, but it was like a punch to the gut for me. Friends who were married one day and the next day it seemed like they were getting ready to have a baby, and then here I was, *years* into marriage, having visited fertility doctors, tracked my cycles, spent a small fortune on home pregnancy tests, got my hopes up every single month, only to be disappointed every single month; wound my way through the foster care system which was its own breed of heartache and heartbreak,

and for whatever twisted reason God seemed to be unrelenting in his “not yet’s.”

- Elizabeth was a much better person than me. Because if I were six months pregnant and in my 50s or 60s or 70s or 80s, dealing with the discomfort of pregnancy along with the discomforts of age, and then Mary showed up on my doorstep, pregnant without even trying? Like, literally. Without even trying. I’m not sure my response would have been one of joy. I probably would have been reeling in the injustice of the situation. “Why is it so hard for me, and so easy for her?”

But the truth is, God had just thrown *both* of these two women **enormous** curveballs. While it is true that Elizabeth wanted nothing more than to be a mom, and her pregnancy was an answer to a lifetime of prayers, this is certainly in *no way* what she had in mind. She had resigned herself to a childless life. She’d probably taken up an instrument or two; bought a motorhome and made it her personal goal to visit all of the National Parks. Become the COOLEST aunt in existence. Found ways to make peace with where her life had ended up, and crafted a beautiful retirement for herself, despite this one dream that had never come to pass.

And when her dream does come true, it is far from sunshine and roses. I am guessing that on at least a few occasions during those nine months she probably found herself thinking “what was I *thinking?*!” and “I’m too old for this nonsense!” – especially with little baby John sending well-aimed kicks up into her ribcage – and her ribs just simply didn’t have as much give as they used to. And it is a really good thing that the Internet had not been invented yet because a quick Google search on potential pregnancy complications in women of advanced maternal age would have sent her into a tailspin of worry and anxiety.

And then, we have Mary. I mean, talk about a curveball. She was so young and starry-eyed. She’d probably just hit puberty. Her body is changing, rapidly. She is a mess of adolescent hormones. And, she is engaged to be married. So many life changes coming her way, in such a short span of time. She has her whole entire life ahead of her, and no doubt she is dreaming wistfully of what it might be like. What would it be like to be married? How many kids would she and Joseph have? What would their names be? Where would they live? Would she get along with her in-laws? How would holidays go for them as a couple? What traditions from her childhood would she like to carry with her into adulthood?

Her days are filled with planning and preparations; meticulously getting everything ready for her to start her life, and start it off right. She no doubt has friends around her age, and maybe a year or two older, who have been through this too – who have gotten married and started their families, and they’ve talked at length with her about what to expect, and Mary is feeling nervously excited. Hopeful. Confident – because she’s heard that Joseph is a great guy and she has hit the jackpot with him.

But then, the angel appears to Mary and all of a sudden nothing is the same. Body changes? Hormone changes? Rapid life changes? She ain't seen nothin' yet. And that great guy Joseph? How great would he be when Mary told him that she was going to have a baby...and the baby wasn't his? How would that go? Would he understand? Would he believe her, that she hadn't done anything wrong? Was she tainted, now? Would anybody want her? All of that planning, and those hopes and dreams? For all Mary knew at the time, they were as good as dead. At least, they would have been had the angel not paid a visit to Joseph too.

And yes, Mary had thought about having kids. She probably even assumed that kids would happen sooner rather than later. But this is not how she expected this to go. And ohmygosh, the pressure of trying to keep God's only child alive? I mean, pretty much every new parent is secretly terrified a lot of the time that the baby will just stop breathing in the middle of the night. But when the fate of the world rests on that baby making it to adulthood? In a time in history where 1 in 3 babies didn't survive until their first birthday? No pressure, Mary!

So here we have these two women, Elizabeth and Mary. Both of them pregnant by a miracle. Both of them having to completely re-think what they thought life was going to look like. Neither one of them had a playbook for this. They couldn't chat with their friends about what to expect because...well...nobody else would get it. I mean, if Elizabeth had a time machine she could travel back about 1700 years and have coffee with Sarah, but aside from that, both women were basically on their own with this, making it up as they went along; trying not to get too weighted down by all of the uncertainty and the what-ifs and the hows and the why mes.

And then they found each other.

I love this story – how Mary appears on Elizabeth's doorstep. And when Elizabeth answers the door and Mary opens her mouth to speak, John the Baptist leaps with joy in his mother's womb. And it isn't just this unborn baby who isn't even big enough to breathe on his own who is filled with joy; it is also Elizabeth.

Elizabeth says "why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" She is truly honored to be standing in the presence of this young girl who would soon be giving birth to the savior of the world – even while she herself is the bearer of a miracle.

And even though Mary and Elizabeth could not have been more different, what they share with each other is a mutual understanding that nobody else in the world would have. They both knew that neither of them had a map to guide them. Both of them were physically un-prepared for what was about to happen. They both had more questions than they had answers. Both of their lives had been completely turned upside-down by God's crazy, wild, hair-brained idea that God wanted to come to earth. And neither of them knew how exactly that was going to play out.

But in the midst of the weariness and the aches and the pains and the questions and the fears and the long list of “I don’t knows”; in the midst of the sideways looks and muttered expressions of disapproval that both of them would have been getting from strangers as they walked through the middle of town; in the midst of the feelings of “I know I asked for this, but I didn’t ask for *this*, exactly;” when each of these two women could have easily spiraled down into a hole of anxiety and fear and “why mes,” the one thing that both of them exude when they are in the presence of each other is none other than joy.

Our Christmas song that we are exploring today (because we are almost done with the sermon and we do need to talk about it since...yeah...this series is supposed to be about favorite Christmas songs) – our song today is none other than the classic “Joy to the World,” written in 1719 by the great hymn writer Isaac Watts. It’s a bit of an unusual Christmas song, because instead of being based on the Christmas story itself, it is based on a Psalm – Psalm 98: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.” Easy to do when life is going well; maybe a little bit harder when we are hit with an unexpected diagnosis, or the loss of a loved one, or the hot water heater dies, or a tornado ravages a community where we have loved ones.

But here’s why I love this hymn: I love it for verse 3:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found.*

There is another version of this verse, re-written for the United Reformed Church in the UK, that I think I like even more:

*No more let thorns infest the ground,
or sins and sorrows grow;
wherever pain and death are found
he makes his blessings flow.*

I love it because it is so real. It never says that life is going to go according to plan. In fact, it acknowledges that it won’t. Life will be filled with thorns and sins and sorrows and pain and death. Life will be filled with the unexpected – both the exciting and the challenging, sometimes all at the same time. But even in those moments – *especially* in those moments, God’s blessings flow and joy is re-born within the world.

Friends, if you are sitting here today and taking in air, you know what it feels like to be thrown curveballs by God. To have to live with the unexpected. I have found the old adage to be true: “If you want to make God laugh, make a plan.”

I certainly did not plan to move across the country and then 8 months in, to be struck by a global pandemic. I didn’t have a playbook for that. None of us did. And since then the

whole world has basically been making up everything as we've gone along – sometimes well, and other times not-so-well.

We all walk through strange times, and although they are always challenging, they are not always bad. Sometimes, we might lose a job, and wind our way through a season of fear and uncertainty, only to land in a new job that was better than the one we lost – that we may not have even have thought to apply for, had life gone like we'd expected. I have a friend who recently gave birth to a little boy with Down's Syndrome. And even though that wasn't part of the plan, and there was (and still is) a lot of grief in that, the gifts that that little boy brings to my friend's life are unmatched.

And during these seasons, when things aren't going exactly according to plan, it can be easy for us to get discouraged, frustrated, angry, depressed. We see that happening all around us as people divide against people and choose to live out of a place of anger pretty much all the time.

But there is another choice that we can make – we can choose to open the door when God knocks. We can choose to believe that through the unexpected, something is birthing inside of us. We can choose to trust that through the discomfort and the kicks and the backaches and the morning sickness and the "I'm too old for this" or the "I have no clue what I'm doing because I'm only a child" – through all of it, God is bringing about something new. And when we choose this, that doesn't make grief and sadness disappear. But it does open up space inside of us so that things like hope, and love, and most of all joy can also settle inside of our souls.

And so it is my prayer today that through all of the uncertainty and the twists and turns and curveballs that life may throw our way, I pray that we might open the door to the knocking of God's spirit – to the joy of God's presence bubbling inside of us, even amidst everything else that may be swirling around. And I pray that in the presence of God, something inside of us might leap for joy, as we recognize that our savior is coming. Is here even now. So joy to the world! the Lord is come! Let every heart prepare him room.